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THE CALIFORNIA DESERT



**A CRITICAL
ENVIRONMENTAL
CHALLENGE**

THE CALIFORNIA DESERT



The California Desert once symbolized the hostile land that America crossed to win the West and create our nation. Today, the desert is a playground for millions of people; home for many; source of livelihood for others. Its wide open spaces beckon to millions, particularly the great urban population of Southern California only a few miles away, to relax from the pressures of urban life.

The California Desert is a 17 million acre national treasure. We, as Americans, own more than 12 million acres of the California Desert. You, personally, share in ownership of this public land.

Now, because the desert is so attractive to so many people, it is in serious trouble and immediate action is needed if the desert as we know it is to survive the mounting pressures being placed upon it.

Despite the production of millions of dollars worth of minerals, forage, crops and materials; despite the presence of remarkable historic, cultural, scientific and educational values; despite the sometimes intangible social and recreational use by millions of people every year, there are great gaps in our knowledge of the California Desert. More importantly, there has been little effort to consider the whole and evaluate the future of the desert in terms of total environment. Without this evaluation, and a plan to guide future use and development, the unchecked, single-purpose invasions now going on constitute environmental Russian roulette.

That is why the Bureau of Land Management—the agency responsible for approximately three-fourths of all the land in the Desert, undertook the California Desert Study and now proposes the California Desert Program.

The first phases of the Desert Study have been summarized in a report—“The California Desert: A Critical Environmental Challenge.” This report identifies the complex resources and uses being made of them. On the basis of total desert environment, unprecedented people impacts and the great potential of the desert, the report sets forth the challenge of the future.

PENALTIES OF INACTION

If we fail to heed the urgent needs of the American people for the California Desert, and the impact of people on the desert, the result will be tragic. These are some of the penalties of inaction:

- Rare or endangered wildlife and plant species may become extinct.
- The answers to many unsolved problems in anthropology, archaeology, and paleontology will never be found because of the destruction of artifacts, fossils and remains.
- Health and safety hazards, crime and even deaths of desert visitors and workers will increase.
- Soil erosion and downstream flood damage will increase, water quality will be degraded and the quality and quantity of wildlife habitat will be lowered.
- Careless, uncontrolled recreation use of the desert will continue and littering will foul the scenery. Indiscriminate off-road vehicle use will damage the desert.
- Lack of information on the desert ecological system will result in inadequate planning, expensive mistakes and costly rehabilitation measures.

CRITICAL MANAGEMENT ACTION

Some critical management actions must be undertaken now, not only to protect tangible and intangible resources, but also for people who use and depend upon these resources. These action needs include:

- Establishment of a protective ranger patrol to protect resources from damage and to protect people from desert hazards.
- Protection and preservation of the irreplaceable resources of the desert. Some scientific, cultural, historic and natural values already have been destroyed.
- Initiation of a conservation-education program. An expanded conservation-education and information program will promote a better understanding of the fragile desert environment.

THE CALIFORNIA DESERT PROGRAM

The Program proposed by the Bureau of Land Management would provide for the orderly development and protection of the entire California Desert.

Comprehensive resource inventories and studies would allow the program to consider all the interrelationships of the Desert's resources and the uses people made of them.

For example, a road would not be built through a valuable archeological site; a campground would not be placed on a vital mineral deposit; powerlines would not be sited so as to damage scenic vistas.

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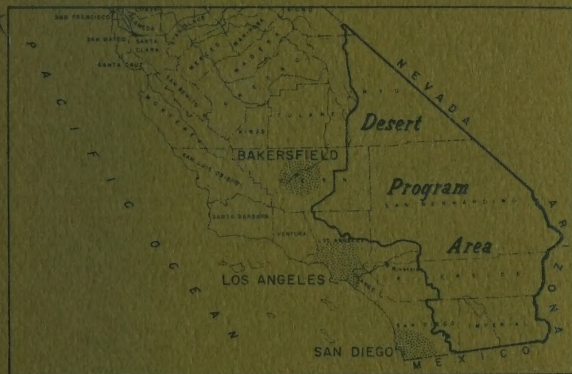
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A CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGE

It must be the goal of the Bureau of Land Management to meet the major predicted needs of the 1980s for the California Desert and its resources, with full understanding of, regard for, and protection of its environmental values. The accelerating increase in demand for the use of the desert will require a major program of investment and management. If this goal is to be met, two vital steps must be taken in the immediate future.

First, a program of data collection and comprehensive planning must be undertaken, in cooperation with other Federal agencies, State and local government, educational institutions, private industry and the public to provide a long-range plan based on sound and adequate data.

Second, a concurrent program of immediate critical management must be undertaken. This must include a ranger patrol to protect desert visitors and resources, protection of the irreplaceable resources of the desert, control of destructive and damaging uses, and a conservation-education and information program to provide better public understanding of the fragile, interdependent ecology of the desert.



Since the BLM's Desert Study proposal was made in 1970, it has been reviewed by a consulting firm with broad experience in resource work. Staffing and budget needs for the comprehensive desert plan and critical management program have been recommended by the consulting firm, and are now being reviewed by the BLM's California and Washington offices.

The consultants' cost estimate for the proposed five-year inventory plan was \$12.5 million; the interim management program to protect people and resources was estimated at an additional \$16 million.

The price is high, but the cost of inaction will be much higher—hazards to desert visitors, loss or damage to rare and endangered plants and wildlife, loss or damage of priceless relics of ancient civilization and our own history, damage to vital range and watershed.

DESERT VALUES AND DAMAGE

The California Desert has great economic importance to California and the nation.

It holds California's richest mineral potential, yielding each year more than \$170 million worth of raw materials, many of which are found nowhere else in the nation. Mineral development is hampered by myriad mining claims—250,000—of which 95 per cent are believed invalid because of lack of mineral discovery.

The California Desert offers potential for irrigated agricultural use and for urban-suburban development.

The answers to many unsolved problems in anthropology, archaeology and paleontology may lie in the California Desert. But studies there of man's primitive culture, fossil animals and plants are more and more frustrated by the destruction of relics by "pot hunters," construction, and the thoughtless tides of people who are trampling, gouging and driving over the desert without knowing what damage they are doing.

The very values people seek on the desert are being degraded. Wildlife habitat is being diminished. Vegetation and soil mantle are being damaged by indiscriminate off-road vehicle use, improper grazing, careless mining operations and unplanned construction, including road building.

Desert visitors are threatened by the inherent hazards of the desert—vast distances, heat, flash floods—and by such manmade hazards as abandoned mining shafts.

Perhaps the greatest value of the desert is its social value as a resting place from the pace of urban life. The BLM's 1968 reconnaissance study found 5 million visitor days of recreational use occurring each year, and

this grows daily. New forms of recreation, particularly the heavy use of the desert by off-road vehicles such as motorcycles, four-wheel drive and dune buggies, are growing rapidly. Unmanaged, this great and growing use threatens the values the desert offers—wide vistas, clear skies, solitude, unique terrain, plants and animal life.

The desert can continue to be many things to many people, but only if it is understood and its complex environmental needs are properly managed.



U. S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

As the nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park and recreational resources. Indian and territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources."

The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each makes its full contribution to a better United States—now and in the future.

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

The Bureau of Land Management, an agency of the Department of the Interior, is charged with the administration of programs for conservation and development of public lands and resources. The BLM administers 453 million acres of the public domain, mostly in Alaska and the 11 western states. There are approximately 16 million acres under BLM jurisdiction in California.

CALIFORNIA STATE OFFICE BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT U. S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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THE
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OUTDOOR PLEDGE



AS A VISITOR TO THE PUBLIC LANDS
I PLEDGE TO:

- KEEP THE LAND CLEAN AND FREE OF LITTER
- RESPECT AND TREAT THE LAND AS MY OWN
- LEAVE GATES AND FENCES AS I FIND THEM
- OBEY STATE GAME AND FISH LAWS
- BE CAREFUL WITH FIRE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR • BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT